



Slow Food: Organic salad mix and red pepper from the Blue Moon Farm (Levertt, Illinois, USA) and elephant garlic from a dedicated specialty garlic farm near Madison, Wisconsin, USA, were purchased at local farmers' markets; Mediterranean olives and Turkish Sultan Olive Oil purchased at Jay's International Foods, St. Louis, Missouri, Illinois. Spectrum Naturals Avocado Oil purchased at Strawberry Fields, Urbana, Illinois, USA.

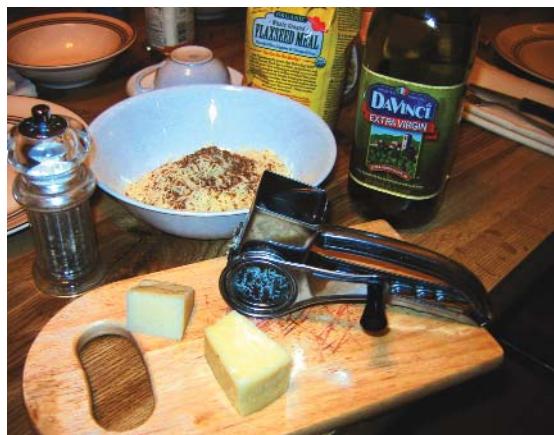
Specialty oils in the kitchen

William Gillespie

Oils are good for you. In this article, with an eye toward establishing a good balance of essential fatty acids in an everyday diet, I explore the world of specialty oils, and conclude with a few ideas for your kitchen.

When I was a freshman at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, USA, my idea of cooking was to dump a can of baked beans into a saucepan and slice a hot dog into it. Then I

started waiting tables at a family-owned Sicilian restaurant called Minneci's, and learned that I could eat much better food without much more work: sautee garlic in olive oil, toss it up in pasta with freshly grated parmesan and romano cheeses, fresh ground pepper, a wedge of lemon, and salt. From then on, "cooking" meant "an excuse to sautee garlic in olive oil." I am all about the Mediterranean diet—fewer ingredients of higher quality—and have been since long before I learned it was healthy. Minneci's offered regular spaghetti with tomato sauce, but I got the sense that was just to humor their customers' expectations of Italian food. It was the



Mixing grated Italian cheese with flax seed.

olive-oil-based pastas that were the center of the menu. I could tell because I saw what the Minnecis ate.

Flaxseed oil

Flaxseed is the best natural source of omega-3 fatty acids: it's off-the-charts rich in α -linolenic acid (ALA). Flaxseed also contains lignans, and is high in fiber. Flaxseed has a fragile chemical structure that is easily destroyed. It is essential to en-

sure flaxseed oil is expeller-pressed, refrigerated, and sold in a sealed, light-proof container. Organic is recommended. Flaxseed oil must not be heated or used for cooking. Flaxseed oil can be used in salad dressing, sprinkled on entrées, or used anywhere you might use butter. Spectrum Naturals (Petaluma, California, USA; see sidebar below) offers cinnamon-flavored flaxseed oil that can be used on desserts. They also offer a combination flaxseed/olive oil as a flavorful topping for potatoes, pasta, salads, or crusty bread.

The nutritious qualities of flaxseed can be even more easily enjoyed ground into flaxseed meal. Its flavor is milder, and ground flaxseed meal makes an innocuous nutty topping on salads, entrees, and even desserts. Health benefits may be obtained by eating a spoonful a day, sprinkled on salads, sliced fruit, yogurt, breakfast cereal, peanut butter sandwiches, and even ice cream. An excellent Italian-style topping for pasta and salad can be prepared by mixing ground flaxseed meal with fresh grated parmesan or pecorino romano cheese, and ground pepper, and keeping a sealed container in the refrigerator for future use. For

baking, an egg substitute reportedly may be fashioned from one tablespoon of flaxseed meal and three tablespoons of water. While flaxseed meal is easy to make use of in the kitchen, the advantage flaxseed oil has over meal (and especially capsules) is that you will be able to taste a bitterness when the oil has undergone oxidation and lost its nutritional value.

Avocado oil

In Mexico, they call avocado "poor man's butter," but, alas, avocados are not as cheap in the United States. Avocado oil resembles olive oil in that it is high in oleic acid and chemically stable, but more versatile for cooking in that it has a very high smoke point (450–520°F). The smoke point, of course, is the temperature at which the oil starts to scorch, which ruins its flavor and chemistry, and may even introduce carcinogens. If you've ever tried to make popcorn by sautéing it with garlic in extra virgin olive oil (true story), you would have noticed that, at popcorn-popping temperatures, olive oil burns, ruining the gourmet effect you had sought to achieve, and possibly your pan as well. Olivado (Kerikeri, New Zealand) is an exclusive producer of a variety of avocado oils. Spectrum Naturals and Loriva (San Leandro, California, USA), as well as Olivada, offer avocado oil.

Avocado oil is flavorful and excellent for all sorts of cooking, salad dressings, or drizzled on tomatoes sprinkled with fresh, shredded basil leaves. It can be used in pesto, pasta, and, of course, Mexican cooking.

Walnut oil

Walnuts and walnut oil are an excellent source of ALA. Though they are not as rich in essential fatty acids as flaxseed, walnuts make a better snack food. For a nutritious, delicious breakfast or dessert topping, mix chopped walnuts, chopped almonds, flaxseed meal, wheat germ, and cinnamon and keep a sealed container on hand. Almonds have antioxidant properties, which help protect the omega-3 acids, and a sweetness that is a nice counterpoint to the robust flavor of walnuts.

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Specialty oil producers: Spectrum Naturals

Spectrum Naturals (Petaluma, California, USA) is a gourmet food producer who convincingly put themselves forward as a company committed to presenting the best possible edible oil, utilizing organic ingredients and innovative production and bottling techniques designed to minimize damage to the oil chemistry.

Like Loriva (San Leandro, California, USA), Spectrum also grew their line from a single product. Jethren Phillips started Spectrum in 1986 by introducing the first naturally expeller pressed canola oil to the United States. He was taken by canola oil's nutritious fatty acid profile, but concerned that these health benefits were being lost through the heat and chemicals used in manufacture.

Spectrum went on to develop an extensive line of certified organic vegetable and fish oils, and claim to have brought the first flaxseed oil to America, among a long list of other firsts. They now also offer mayonnaise, salad dressings, and numerous other gourmet organic culinary products. A rigorously holistic corporate philosophy means they strive to make both their products and processes earth-friendly. This outlook has led to innovation in many aspects of their business, including production techniques, sourcing ingredients, and finding packaging that is both environmentally benign and protective of their product, all so that their efforts will make the smallest possible "footprint" on the earth.

Spectrum recently joined The Hain Celestial Group family (Melville, New York, USA). Spectrum has a highly informational website, including many recipes, at netlink: www.spectrumorganics.com.

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Spectrum and Loriva both offer walnut oils, which are recommended for baking pastries, salad dressings, pesto, or drizzled over roasted golden beets with goat cheese. Spectrum offers both refined and unrefined varieties.

In closing, I should perhaps qualify one thing about the Mediterranean diet. If I understand correctly, Pete and Joe Minneci prefer white pizzas to red (olive-oil based sauce rather than water-based tomato sauce) and would not consider eating pizza without anchovies. Because fish are the only natural source of the other two essential fatty acids EPA and DHA, because smaller fish are less prone to accumulating toxins, and because of the benefits of olive oil, this is a nutritious formula for pizza. However, being no big fan of anchovies, there are some aspects of the Mediterranean diet I still resist, even if they are healthy.

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Specialty oil producers: Barleans

In 1972 Barlean's was a family-owned fishery in Ferndale, Washington, USA. In 1989, the Barlean's family turned to flaxseed oil. Bruce Barlean arranged to meet Johanna Budwig, German biochemist, European authority on fats and nutrition, and world authority on the health benefits of omega-3 oils. They struck an alliance, and Barleans won the rights to reprint her books in the United States. In 1992, Barleans expanded from a flaxseed oil wholesaler to retailing the valuable oil directly to consumers under their brand name. They marketed this enterprise through a large-scale effort to educate consumers and merchants about the benefits of flax.

The company presses flaxseed to deliver oil on demand, the day orders are received, packages it in inert, opaque plastic bottles, then ships it the next morning via courier 3-day air to refrigerated shelves in retail stores. To save time, they do not use a third-party distributor, and though their bottles are shipped unrefrigerated, the freshness of the product and expediency of delivery means the delicate oil is not seriously damaged in transport. Their bottles are stamped with the production date as well as a four-month expiration date. The production, labeling, and distribution processes are all geared to ensure maximum freshness. They call their methods Fresh ExPress.

True to their fisherman roots and their commitment to the benefits of omega-3 acids, they also offer a line of fish oils and various omega-3-rich supplements. Netlink: www.barleans.com.

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